

Excerpt from *Wings of Ash* by Lara S. Chase © 2016

PROLOGUE

“Father, I thought you left ages ago. Why are you still here?”

Father Dmitri looked up from his desk to address the parish secretary. “Ah, well, it is November the eighth, is it not?”

Her eyes darted to the calendar on the wall. “So it is. I had completely forgotten. Do you want me to start a pot of coffee before I go?”

“Already done.”

“Do you think he’ll tell you anything this year?”

“I pray so every year. Perhaps this is the year, eh?” The priest winked. “Go on home, Gail. I know your family is waiting. Mine knows the drill by now.”

After Gail exited, Father Dmitri finished up some work and ate a supper he had packed. Around nine o’clock he brought two folding chairs and a book to the main entrance of the church. He set up the chairs, sat in one, but left the book beside him on the floor for now. Instead, he prayed for the man he knew would eventually stumble through the church doors.

He didn’t know the man’s true name, only the alias he went by: Jared Cooper. He had never known anyone who looked less like a Jared.

When Dmitri had become rector of the parish, the previous priest who had charge of the church had sat him down for a talk. Most of it involved practical matters of a smooth transition, but he saved the strangest bit of information for the end.

“Dmitri, there’s a parishioner you should know about. He goes by Jared.”

“Oh, is he problematic?”

“No, not generally. In fact, the church wouldn’t be here if not for him. When we had our building campaign twenty years ago, he was our largest donor. In addition to

money, he also donated a great deal of lumber, and he was always the first to lend his back for work detail as well."

"Oh, so he's the sort we have to keep happy then." Dmitri didn't care for catering to large donors. Didn't believe in it, in fact. He was a little surprised Father Randall might.

"No, nothing like that. He gives no strings attached."

"Well, what is it then?"

Father Randall stroked his long beard, thinking. "He's a good man. Quiet. Keeps to himself. Always willing to help out if you need something."

Dmitri nodded, still not sure why this man warranted a special conversation.

Father Randall sighed. "He looks to be in his early twenties."

Dmitri nodded again.

"He has looked to be in his early twenties for over twenty years now."

At this, Father Randall finally had Dmitri's attention. "Well, some people age very well. Look at Rob Lowe. The man doesn't seem to age at all."

"Dmitri, the man hasn't even a gray hair or a single wrinkle."

"Hair dye? Plastic surgery?"

Father Randall shook his head. "No. I know this might sound far-fetched, but I had a dream about him after I had been here about ten years. I had just started to have some questions about him, and then I was given this message."

Dmitri paused, giving Father Randall a good once over. He didn't know the man well, but he didn't strike him as someone given to telling tales. "What did you see?"

"It wasn't so much what I saw as what I was told. Namely, that this man was doing God's work, and I should not ask him questions that would make him feel unsafe. Also, that I should guard him against overly curious parishioners. The basic message was that this place should be one where Jared could feel at home. It hasn't been too difficult. I let him come to me, and the people of the church are almost miraculously uninterested in him."

"Hmm." Dmitri chewed on this new bit of information. "Who or what do you think he is?"

"I have no idea. But he's not perfect. Twice a year he'll show up falling down drunk and won't tell you why."

And so Father Dmitri sat at the church entrance, waiting for Jared to open the door as he always did on this night, completely plastered. Around one in the morning, Dmitri was startled by a pounding on the door. He jumped from his chair to answer it. He had left it unlocked, so was confused as to why Jared was knocking.

He opened the door to find a stranger supporting a nearly passed out Jared. Dmitri didn't understand who the man was until he saw a cab parked along the church's curb.

"You Father Dmitri?" the cabbie asked.

"Yes, I'll take him."

"Good. I told the guy, you're already at a hotel, piss drunk. Why you wanna go out to some church? I don't get paid enough for this kind of crap, you know?"

"Did he pay you up front?" Dmitri knew from habit that Jared usually did.

"Yeah. Not enough for hauling him upstairs, though."

"Wait just a moment." Father Dmitri helped ease Jared into the folding chair. He reached into his inside coat pocket. Yes, there was his wallet like always, never in his back jeans pocket where it would be awkward to retrieve. Dmitri opened it and found the crisp hundred dollar bill that he knew would be there. He felt Jared gave the cab drivers too large a tip, but he also knew that Jared would be upset if he knew the cabbie didn't get it.

He handed the bill over to the disgruntled driver. The cabbie's mood improved greatly and he left quickly before Father Dmitri thought better of his generosity.

Dmitri looked down at Jared, already unconscious. He debated trying to get him to the cot he had prepared for him, but decided he wouldn't likely be able to get him to the back room on his own. While Jared wasn't overweight, he was a tall man, and

probably weighed at least 180. Dmitri stood over him, shaking his head.

"Why so bad tonight, my friend? You always smell as if you had bathed in vodka, but you usually can walk yourself in."

Jared's long black hair was beginning to escape from the tight ponytail he had styled it in. He had probably fallen more than once tonight. Dmitri sighed again, and pulled the hair tie loose so he could fix it. He knew Jared didn't have it that way merely as a fashion choice. It was only a matter of time before his friend was sick, and Jared had it pulled back so he didn't get vomit in his hair.

Dmitri did his best to wrangle the thick, wavy hair back away from Jared's face. As he did, Jared stirred briefly. He uttered a name so softly, Dmitri almost didn't catch it: "Galine."

The next morning, Dmitri awoke to the smell of coffee drifting right under his nose. He opened his eyes to see Jared standing in front of him with a steaming mug.

"Fresh?"

Jared nodded. "I'm the only one that deserves to drink the bitter swill that's been on all night." He took a drink out of his own mug and grimaced.

"You are drinking the swill, aren't you?"

Jared ignored the question. "I've come to make confession."

"If it's the usual confession of overindulging in alcohol, then you can assume my response will be the usual as well. Let's just skip it this year."

Jared frowned at the priest. "That's not how it works."

"Yes, well technically you're also supposed to repent and sin no more, but you still come in twice a year. You don't hold up your end, I'm not going to hold up mine."

"So I'm not forgiven."

Dmitri put down his cup of coffee. "That's not what I said. However, I would like to put an end to this cycle. It's not so much because I'm tired of being there for you, Jared. I hope you know that I'll show up for the next forty years if I have to, but I'd rather you

just tell me why you drink yourself silly twice a year so we can move past it."

Jared replied with stony silence.

"Is it a woman?" Dmitri couldn't miss the visible flinch. "Ah, so it is. Surely whatever happened on November 8th and April 10th can be made right with her."

"I'm afraid not, Father. What haunts me on those days are ghosts long buried. There's nothing that can make it right."

"Well, what of Galine?"

Jared's pale blue eyes fixed on him, and he gripped his coffee mug so tightly, some of the bitter sludge slopped over the side. "Where did you hear that name?"

"From you, last night. Is she still living?"

Jared gave a curt nod.

"Well then, surely in that case there is something that can be done?"

"No, Father, this time is the worst of all. She'll never come back to me."

"Why not?"

"Because she loves me."

CHAPTER 1

Getting over a break-up is always difficult, but it's worse when your friends and family are plotting against you. I had almost forgiven my sister and best friend Harper for forcing me into that awkward date last night with the cute new neighbor. Almost. I got the nagging feeling, though, they weren't done meddling, and Alex was going to be trouble.

When I arrived home from work that night, I found Katja clearing dishes from the table. "Did you eat dinner already?" I asked her. Even though I got home late, my sister was always great about waiting to eat with me.

"No, Alex and I snacked on some of that pound cake you made yesterday," she said.

"Alex was over here? With you? *Alone?*" I frowned. Alex had promised to keep his mitts off my too beautiful teen-aged sister, but I wasn't sure he'd keep his word.

"Oh relax. We just talked. I wanted to know how your date went."

"Does no one have any respect for my privacy around here?"

"No, not so much. It's not like there was much to tell anyway. He said you shut him down with the whole 'friends' talk."

"That is correct. So your and Harper's scheming was all for naught." I thought about sticking my tongue out at her but decided that wasn't mature.

"I don't understand why you won't even give him a chance. You and Sasha have been apart longer now than you were together. I get that you got your heart broken, Galine, but you've got to get back out there. You'll fall in love again." My little sister wasn't supposed to be the one giving me these little pep talks, her brown eyes full of sympathy.

In a normal world where I was a regular girl and Sasha was a regular guy, what Kat was saying would be true. But nothing about our relationship had been normal, and he

hadn't broken my heart. The break-up would have been so much easier if we were normal, if Sasha had gotten tired of me. After a few years, maybe I could have moved on. Not with someone flashy like Alex, and not someone who reminded me of Sasha, but maybe a nice short guy who was prematurely balding. He'd have a nice boring office job, and if I wasn't in love with him, there would at least be a fondness there. But the Gamayun wasn't allowed to love anyone, so even my dreams of dull companionship with a mousy accountant would never come true.

Katja exhaled with a sigh, and it brought my attention back to her. She looked sad and worried, and she was playing with her long dark hair, which meant I had probably been zoned out for too long.

"So, did the two of you talk about anything else or just gossip about our date?"

She was reluctant to answer, and I thought it was because she wanted to press the dating thing, but that wasn't it. "We talked about Mom."

"Senovia? Why did you talk about her?"

"I don't remember how we got on the topic, but Alex is a good listener. It's not like you ever want to talk about her."

This was true. There wasn't a topic I liked discussing less than Senovia, and that included when I had to give Katja the sex talk. Kat always wanted to plead our mother's case. She would try to tell me Senovia had changed, or wasn't as bad as I thought she was, or something along those lines.

"So what did you tell Alex? Or do I want to know?" I almost hated to ask.

"I told him that she had a hard time after Dad died and wasn't in a place where she could take care of us. I said you raised me, made sure I was safe and had what I needed." She shrugged like what she said was no big deal.

Her admission was, in fact, a big deal. I had never heard my sister give me so much credit before. She was always giving me a hard time about how I treated Senovia, not telling me she appreciated what I had done for her.

“You said that?” I was still in awe.

“It’s true. You’re the reason I have a roof over my head, clothes on my back, food to eat—I know all this. And it’s not just what you’ve given me, Galine, it’s what you’ve given up.”

“So I go to a few school functions. It’s not like I have a life anyway, Kat.”

“I’m not talking about an evening here or there. When I took my PSAT last month, do you know what Mrs. Collins asked me when she collected my test?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” I said, not meeting her eye. I had a good idea what that blabbermouth guidance counselor had said.

“She asked if I thought I’d done as well as you had. She wanted to know if there were going to be two National Merit Scholars in the Karsavina family. I felt like an idiot because I didn’t have any idea what she was talking about.”

“The PSAT is the test you take to qualify as a National Merit—” I started, but Katja cut me off.

“Not that part. I’m well aware of how the system works. I’m talking about the part where you could have gone to more than one out-of-state school on a full ride, but Mrs. Collins said you wouldn’t apply to a single college. Why didn’t you tell me, Galine?”

“Because it didn’t matter. Senovia left around the time I could have sent in all those applications. I wasn’t going to leave you, too, okay?”

“But college? Growing up all you talked about was when you’d get out of here.”

“Things change. I made my decision, and I’d do it again. Besides, once I get you through college and you’re making the big bucks, I intend to come mooch off of you.” I grinned at her, hoping she’d stop feeling guilty. I was going to have words with Mrs. Collins.

I got a half smile in response. “So is that why you were drilling me with all those flash cards? You were hoping maybe I’d get a scholarship?”

“The thought had crossed my mind, yes. I did remember there were colleges making

me amazing offers because I did well on one test. Don't worry, though. Even if you bombed it, we'll figure out how to pay for college somehow." I still wasn't sure how. For all my scrimping and saving, the college fund I had started for Katja was still meager.

"Oh, I already know how I'm going to pay for college," she said.

"How?" I had visions of my sister in a seedy strip club, twirling around a pole. The goal of parenting was to keep your kids off the pole, right? Had I failed my sister?

"You're not going to become an exotic dancer are you?" Then I realized there was something even worse. "Or a prostitute?"

"Galine! You've been watching way too many Lifetime movies," she scolded. "It's not so sinister. Harper's family has a scholarship fund for low income families. They give away a ton of money every year. Harper says we meet the income requirements. She said I have to maintain a 3.75 GPA, which I have done, and be in some extra-curriculars, which I am. Next year I fill out some paperwork and write an essay, and that's it. She says the money is mine. Harper also said you can't be mad about it because it's an established program that's been around for years with rules and everything, and that I'd be eligible even if you weren't her best friend."

"I can too be mad," I complained. "When were you guys going to tell me about this? Do you know how much ramen I've eaten trying to put away money for your college?"

"Wait, you're not mad because of the money, you're mad because we didn't tell you? That doesn't make any sense. You throw a fit anytime Harper tries to give you anything."

"That's different. It's for you. I'd thought about asking Harper to lend me the money. Of course, it would take me at least twenty years to pay her back."

"Well now you don't have to pay her back. It's an official thing, and it's some trust I think her grandparents set up, so it's not even her money," Katja informed me.

"Still, when the time comes, we're both going to write detailed thank-you notes. And

you are going to go study this instant. You need to keep up that GPA." I flapped my arms at her, scooting her in the direction of her books.

I was in an excellent mood the rest of the evening, so much so, I was feeling generous when Alex knocked on the door later that night. "Hello," I greeted him cheerfully, not even scolding him for visiting Katja unsupervised.

"Hello yourself," he said, smiling. "I don't know what you're cooking, but I could smell it from my apartment."

"Cinnamon rolls for breakfast tomorrow."

"I don't suppose I could have a couple?" He gave me what could only be described as a puppy dog look. His hazel eyes widened and his full lips pouted. I swear he even tossed that mane of perfectly styled blond hair a little bit.

"You know, I'm not your personal bakery." I was beginning to feel manipulated, and it was annoying.

"C'mon. Living next to you is going to be torture if I don't get to eat any of the stuff I can smell. I had an idea for an arrangement. That's why I came over." He ducked into the apartment. "Hey, Kat." He nodded to my sister on the couch.

I frowned at him. Katja was already a nickname, short for Ekaterina. Those closest to her got to shorten it even further to Kat. I wasn't comfortable with how familiar he was with her already. "What arrangement?"

"I don't know anyone here besides you two, and it gets lonely over there. Plus, you're such a great cook, I thought maybe we could do a trade. Let's pool our resources and do dinners together. Sometimes you can cook, and on the other nights I can get us take out, or we can go out. I can pay because it's a trade, not a date. Plus, your sister will be there."

"In the interest of full disclosure, she's an average cook. It's the baking she's good at."

Katja chimed in this backhanded compliment from the living room.

"Hey!"

"Well, if he's going to pay to take us out, he should know that he's trading for some nights of Tuna Helper."

"That's more than I can manage," he said. "I'm useless in the kitchen. I feel like the desserts make up for subpar cooking anyway."

"You're walking a fine line here already, buster. Insulting me is not going to help."

"How was that an insult?" He asked, confused.

Katja offered yet another unsolicited comment. "I think it's a great idea."

"Of course you do." Traitor.

"Two against one, you're outvoted." Alex grinned in victory.

"Democracy stinks."

I stand by that statement. Ever since getting outvoted, Alex became a fixture in our apartment. He was there when I got home, and I had to shove him out the door each night so Katja and I could get some sleep. My sister adored him, and why not? He knew how to tease and flatter in the right amounts until she was putty in his hands. To my great relief, he continued to respect the firm line I drew for him about no funny business with Katja. He still called her Kat, but otherwise, he never did anything I could complain about.

With me, however, he was more than comfortable pushing the boundaries. He found subtle and not so subtle excuses to touch me, and he wouldn't shut up about my beautiful green eyes and silky red hair. Anytime we went to a restaurant, he always sat too close to me. If we were watching TV, his arm always crept from the back of the couch to my shoulders. I'd give him a dirty look, and he'd move his arm, but twenty minutes later it would be back again. And one night at dinner, while I was passing him the salad, Alex put his hand on my knee. I'm sure it was strategic. He thought since my hands were full he'd get away with it. He was wrong; I kicked his shin under the table.

None of this dissuaded him. If anything, it made him try harder. He was extra sweet to Katja. He complimented my hair, whatever I was wearing that day, anything I

cooked. "This sandwich is fantastic, Galine. What is it?" he asked, beaming at me.

"Spam."

He choked. "Well, you do amazing things with low-grade meat."

"Liar."

"Galine, be nice." Katja turned red, always embarrassed by my behavior with Alex.

So it was Alex that answered the door the night Senovia visited. Katja was washing the dinner dishes, and I was having a second helping of dessert at the table. Alex sat on the couch near the door, so he popped up and opened it, without bothering to check who was knocking.

"Hello," he greeted her, not seeming to care that she was a complete stranger.

"Hi, I am being Senovia Karsavina, and you are?" she said, sweet as honey. As usual, she was wearing one of her too tight and too bright dresses. A cloud of cigarette smoke and perfume wafted behind her.

"Alex Ramsey."

"Oh, I like you much better than nasty man she had here last time. Little birdie said he was gone." She flashed Alex her best smile and traced one acrylic nail along his face.

That explained why Senovia felt bold enough to return. I knew she wouldn't have tried it if she thought she might run into Sasha again. "Alex, shut the door," I commanded.

My warning came too late, though. Senovia had already slithered into the apartment.

"Katja, dear, you look beautiful." She had already zeroed in on my sister. She reached for a hug, which Kat was happy to give her.

"Out, Senovia, I mean it." I pointed in the direction of the door.

"Do not get worked up, Galine. I am not being here to fight."

"Then why are you here?"

"Well, Kat has birthday next week, and I will not be invited to party, no?"

"That's correct. You're not invited."

Senovia glared at me, then continued. "So, I give present now." She retrieved a small box wrapped in bright pink paper from her purse as she spoke.

"That's it?" I was wary. Senovia never had an innocent agenda, and she'd didn't give anything without the promise of something in return. I was sure she had an ulterior motive, even if it was as simple as trying to get back into Kat's good graces.

"That's it." She even made the cross-your-heart movement with her finger across her chest.

I sighed, regretting my decision already. "Fine, you can give her the gift, but then you have to leave." I supposed it was possible she wanted to do something nice for Katja. She was known to do that from time to time for my sister.

She handed the package to Katja, who tore it open. I couldn't remember the last time Senovia had given me a present, and it had even been a few years for Katja. She lifted the lid on the box and revealed a gold bracelet, its links made of interlocked male and female ballet dancers.

I recognized it immediately. My father was an amazing dancer, but he was never as breath-taking as when he danced with Senovia. She had been a ballerina in the Kirov Ballet, where my father had danced as well before they immigrated to the U.S. My father used to tell us girls that he knew my mother was beautiful, but he didn't know he loved her until he danced with her. He had the bracelet made for her as a wedding present, and when he was alive, she never took it off. After he died, it disappeared. Like anything else that reminded her of our father—speaking Russian, our dance lessons, my father's faith—it had been taken away. I thought maybe the bracelet had been lost.

"Oh, Mom, it's gorgeous." Katja touched the links with her fingertips. "Where did you get it?" Kat had been too little to remember the piece's significance.

"Pyotr gave it to me, and now it yours," Senovia said, her breath catching when she said my father's name.

Katja's eyes filled with tears. "Mom, it's too much," she insisted, trying to give the

bracelet back.

"No, my dear, it yours. Wear it and think happier days." She took the golden dancers from the box and fastened them around Katja's wrist, then kissed her on the cheek.

"Happy birthday."

"Thanks." Katja embraced her again.

I was so upset I was speechless. I turned away, and gripped the grungy beige fabric of our couch. My knuckles turned white, and if I were any stronger, I might have been able to bend the cheap frame beneath the foam.

I should've been used to Senovia's head games. One minute she was playing the victim, and then next she was outright threatening me. She was consistent in her inconsistency. My mother didn't have many rules to her manipulations, but I had picked up on a few. One, she always showed a preference for Katja. Two, whatever was wrong was somehow my fault. But the grand-daddy of all was to never, ever mention my father. She never brought him up, and if I ever did, she flew into a rage. To do it now convinced me the lengths she was willing to go to get Katja back.

Good to her word, once the gift was delivered, Senovia left without a fuss. "So that was your mom, huh?" Alex commented as the door closed. "She didn't seem so bad."

"She's not," Katja agreed, shooting me a look.

"She's playing at something. I'm sure there's some agenda here." I continued to maim our already pathetic couch.

"That was a nice moment for me, Galine. Why do you feel like you have to ruin it? Let me enjoy it." Katja's face crumpled.

"Sorry, Kat. I don't trust her."

"Maybe she's changed," Alex said.

"You stay out of this."

"I don't want to fight with you tonight. I'm going to bed." Katja collected the box and wrapping paper and headed into the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

"What's the big deal?" Alex asked once she had departed. "So your mom gave her a bracelet. Did you want it or something?"

It was actually one of the few things of Senovia's I wouldn't have minded. Since she never wore it after my dad died, it didn't have the taint of all the horrible things that followed. That wasn't it, though. "I don't care that she gave it to Kat. I just worry she's up to something. I wonder how she found out Sasha isn't around anymore."

"Why would that matter?"

"Sasha scares the crap out of her. Kat made the mistake of telling Mom where we live a few months back, but Sasha made it clear she wasn't welcome here. I hope I'm not going to have to move now."

"Maybe you should give her a chance. Or even if you don't want to be around her, it doesn't mean Kat should have to cut off all contact, right?"

"Maybe you should go home, Alex."

"Hey, don't be mad. Listen, I have a present for you, too." He danced around with excitement, his hazel eyes flashing.

"Why? It's not my birthday."

"I got one for Kat, too, but I'll give it to her next week. But while I was out shopping, I saw this, and I knew you'd get a lot of use out of it. It's not very romantic..."

I started to give him a dirty look.

"But since we're *just friends*," he continued, "I figured that didn't matter. I'll go grab it and be right back." He bounded out of the apartment, leaving the door hanging wide open. A minute later he returned hefting an enormous box. It must have been heavy if his grunting was any indication.

"What in the world is that?"

"You'll have to open it and see," he said, placing it on the floor in front of me.

"It's not a puppy, is it?"

"No. Open it."

Against my better judgment, I tore off the newspaper he had used to wrap my present. It was a Kitchen-Aid stand mixer.

Alex hovered over me, excited, "It's one of those fancy mixers!" he announced in case I didn't have eyes. "I thought you could use it for all your baking. Kat said I shouldn't get it because it was 'enabling your obsessive coping strategy.' I told her eating your cookies was enabling, too, so I didn't see why I couldn't give your arms a break." He was delighted with his gift, and hoping I would be to.

Despite my best efforts to stay disgruntled with him and my history of not accepting gifts, I was pleased. In fact, I was thrilled. "It's perfect," I admitted, and gave him a huge hug.

That was a mistake. Alex mistook my gratitude for passion. Before I even knew what was happening, he kissed me. I tried to pull back, but like all my attempts to dissuade him, this encouraged him instead. Fed up, I resorted to more drastic measures. Using all my strength, I punched him right in the mouth.

Alex yowled and swore at me. "Dammit, Galine, that hurt!"

"It was supposed to!"

"You split my lip! I'm bleeding all over my shirt!"

"Don't yell at me. I could not have been more clear how uninterested in you I am. Why did you kiss me?"

"Girls say they're not interested all the time. It means they want to be pursued."

"Well let me make this crystal clear for you: I do not want to be pursued!"

"Fine!"

"Get out of here, and stop bleeding on my carpet!"

CHAPTER 2

Alex had the good sense to stay away the rest of the week. Not that he needed to be present to plead his case. My sister was relentless on his behalf. "Galine, you have to forgive him eventually."

"No I don't." I was sure I could stay mad at him a long time. I was immortal, after all.

"I'm sure he's sorry."

"I don't think he is."

"Well even if he's not, do you think he's going to make a pass at you again after how you acted?" Katja tried a new tactic.

"Not if he has half a brain."

"Then what's the harm in being friends again?"

"You assume he has at least half a functioning brain, Kat."

"Please will you try to talk to him? My birthday's tomorrow, and I want him to come to dinner with us like we planned." She made her best sad face. That was low.

"I'll think about it," was the best I could promise.

I had almost decided to go talk to Alex, but going to him didn't prove necessary. When I got home from work that day, I found him sitting in my apartment, eating brownies. Katja wasn't home from practice yet. "What are you doing here, and better yet, how did you get in? Do you pick locks?"

"Naw, Kat gave me a key forever ago," he replied, continuing to stuff his face with brownies.

Oh, she was in trouble. "That still doesn't explain why you're here."

"I came to call a truce. I swear to not try anything with you ever again. My body couldn't take it. You've already made me bleed twice. That's plenty for me." I noticed his bottom lip was still swollen and ugly looking. I couldn't help smirking. "I just want to be friends, for real this time. I like hanging out with you and Kat when you're not

trying to injure me."

"I don't know, Alex. I don't have the energy to keep fending you off."

"I mean it, Galine. No more funny business. If I so much as leer at you, you can toss me out and never see me again." He did look like he was telling the truth this time.

"I'll hold you to that," I told him.

"That's fine. Now can I please come to Katja's birthday tomorrow?"

I sighed. "All right."

Alex stood up, and I could tell he wanted to give me an excited hug, but he stayed put. "Thanks."

Katja was thrilled to hear that Alex and I had made up, although she was less excited to get a lecture about giving access to our apartment to someone without my permission. In the end, she promised not to do it again, and I agreed to let Alex keep the key for the time being.

The day of Katja's birthday, I wasn't dreading the dinner quite so much. Katja wouldn't be mopey because Alex got to come, and I was 80 percent sure he would behave, so I was less apprehensive.

I talked to Harper about it over our almost nonexistent lunch break at the hospital.

"Oh, so I finally get to meet the famous Alex tonight, huh?" she said.

"That's right. I keep forgetting you haven't met him yet."

"I have to admit, the curiosity has been killing me. I've never heard someone described in such starkly different ways before."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, to hear you talk, he's average looking with below average intelligence and above average annoyance capabilities. He's just enjoyable enough to tolerate in small doses."

"That sounds about right," I said.

"But Katja says he looks like a Greek god, is kind and generous, and is the most

charming person she has ever met."

"She's young and impressionable."

"Well, I guess I'll see who's right tonight."

Harper and I planned to ride to the restaurant together after work, so we changed in the locker room. To be safe, since Alex was going to be there, I figured I should dress as prudish as possible. As I looked at my frumpy khakis and button-up dress shirt, I was certain I had accomplished my goal.

"You aren't going to wear that are you?" Harper asked from behind me.

"I most certainly am." I turned around and was about to explain my reasoning when I got a look at Harper. I should have realized that as long as I walked in next to her, it wouldn't matter what I wore. Even for her, though, this was something.

I'd been out with her and Cole a few times, and she always wore elegant outfits with classic lines. Her sleek blonde hair was usually styled in a rigid updo. Tonight, though, she wore a short skirt and heels that resembled stilts more than footwear. Her top looked modest from the front, but then I caught a look at the back, or rather, the scrap of fabric passing for a back. Her hair was down, which made the top a little less scandalous.

"Harper Carlisle, you are dressed to flirt!" I shook my head in wonder. "Well, I hope flirting is all that's happening tonight. My sixteen-year-old sister is going to be present, you know."

Harper swatted me with her purse. "Yes, flirting is all I intend to do, and besides, as of today, she's seventeen."

"Well then, by all means, hook up with someone right in front of her."

"Oh, stop it. There's this cute bartender at City Beverage that used to flirt with me, but I was with Cole, so I had to discourage it. I thought tonight might be an opportunity to let him know I'm a free woman."

"Whatever. Let's get going, or we're going to be late."

Harper drove fast, but we were still the last to arrive. And Harper delayed us even further by insisting on taking a spin through the bar to see the cute bartender. Like all bars, it was dark, so it took us a moment to make sure he wasn't there.

"Dang. He's not working."

"You didn't check before you got all dressed up?"

"It's hard to play it cool if he knows you already called ahead to see if he's working."

We made our way into the restaurant. The lighting was brighter on that side, and I spotted our group immediately and pointed them out to Harper. "Over there next to the fake palm tree." Katja and Jodi were already there, hanging on Alex's every word. I heard a sharp intake of breath, and turned to find Harper stopped short. "What?" I tried to shoo her toward the table.

"Honey, that man is *so* not average-looking."

"Seriously?" I looked at Alex again for the umpteenth time. Stupid blond highlights, a tight shirt that showed off his "guns," and what had to be a fake tan. I still didn't see it.

"Maybe I'll get to do some flirting after all," Harper purred like a cat. No, more like a panther.

"With Alex?!"

"What, you've made it clear you're not interested."

"I thought you were trying to avoid guys like Cole."

"If he's like Katja says, he's nothing like Cole. I hate to say it, but so far, her description is far more accurate." With that, she strutted toward the table. I chased after her, not as confident about the dinner going well anymore.

After Alex caught sight of Harper, I was certain things were going downhill. The look he gave her was so sexual, I almost covered my sister's eyes. To my absolute horror, Harper returned it.

"Alex!" I scolded.

"What?" he demanded, tearing his eyes away from Harper. "I wasn't looking at you. I

didn't break the truce." Well, that was true at least. In all the time he had been pursuing me, I had never gotten that look of open lust before, and for that I was grateful.

"You could at least introduce yourself before eating her with your eyes!" I could hear Kat and Jodi giggling behind me.

"I didn't mind," Harper said.

"Yes, that was clear." I said, making my irritation at her just as obvious.

Alex stood up and pulled out a chair for Harper next to him. "I'm Alex, and you must be Miss Carlisle."

"Please, Harper." She smiled and started to sit.

I shoved her to the next chair over and sat down next to Alex instead. They both glared at me. "No way. We are keeping this dinner strictly PG. There are children present."

"Hey!" Katja and Jodi both exclaimed.

"All of you sit down, behave, and look at your menus," I ordered. I grabbed a menu to set the example.

"Still so bossy," a voice accused from behind me.

I continued to study my burger options, and didn't bother to turn around. "I thought it was made clear that you were not invited," I reminded Senovia.

"Oh, but I was."

I placed my menu on the tabletop and shot a glance at my sister, who looked guilty. "Kat?"

Instead of crumbling under my stare, though, she jutted her chin forward and informed me, "I wanted her here. I have a right to see my mother on my birthday."

I narrowed my eyes at her, but decided to deal with her later. I turned to my mother. "Senovia, I want you to leave."

"No. I have right to be here." Her look was defiant as well.

I turned to Jodi. "Jodi, I'm sorry to do this to you, but you're going to have to leave."

"Why?" Katja pounded her hand on the table in a mini-tantrum.

I ignored her. "You drove, right?" Jodi nodded. "I don't think you've ever been present for one of our family fights, but I imagine you've heard stories." She nodded again. "So I assume you'll listen to me and leave?" With a third nod, Jodi got up and left without a peep.

"That's not fair. I can't believe you did that!" Katja continued to shoot daggers at me.

"Senovia, are you ready to leave yet?"

"No."

"Kat, are you ready to rescind your invitation?"

"No!"

"Alex, at this point, I feel I should give you the option to leave too," I said.

For a minute, I thought he was going to take me up on it, but then he took another good look at Harper. "You leaving?" he asked her.

"No. I'm not leaving until Galine does," she stated, giving Senovia a warning look.

"I'm good then." Alex crossed his arms and leaned back against his chair.

"Well, Senovia, if you won't leave, then we will. Katja, let's go."

"I'm not budging." Kat scooted further down in her seat to make her point.

"Ekatarina Petrovna Karsavina, you come with me this instant or I'm grounding you for a month," I hissed at her.

Kat shot out of her chair like it was on fire. "Sorry, Mom," she mumbled.

Senovia was furious. "You ruin everything, Galine. Everything you touch turns to ash."

I whirled around to face her. "What did you say?" I was supposed to be the prophet, but her words had the eerie feeling of a premonition.

"C'mon, it's not worth it," Harper assured me, urging me toward the exit with Katja and Alex in tow. We made it out to the parking lot, but I was still shaken, and Kat was fuming. "Let me take you home," Harper offered.

"No, it makes more sense for Alex to take us," I said.

"I can do that." Alex herded us toward the Ferrari.

Harper did a double take when she saw the car. "Does that even have a back seat?"

"It's not big, but you'd be surprised what you could do back there," Alex said, his implication clear. I was about to yell at him and Harper again, but they already looked repentant. We said our goodbyes to Harper, and headed for home.

As I rode in Alex's car, I felt something wedged into the seat behind me. I tugged at it, and a pair of lacy underwear came loose. Mortified, I shoved it back where it came from before Katja saw it. I gave Alex a dirty look, but he wasn't paying attention. I was going to have a talk with Harper in the morning about how unsuitable Alex was.

Alex wished Katja a happy birthday, then beat a hasty exit back to his apartment, leaving the two of us alone. I started in on her the minute Alex shut the door.

"What were you thinking? You know the rules."

"I was thinking I'm tired of following your rules!" she yelled back. "Let's be honest, Galine, they're not there to protect me, they're there to protect you."

"That's not true."

"I think it is. Listen, I don't understand why Mom is so mean to you, but she's nice to me."

"So abandoning you was nice, was it? Kat, you always do this. You forgive her, and she draws you back in. Sooner or later, she'll leave again. Then you'll be devastated, and I'll have to pick up the pieces."

"All the more reason to spend time with her while she's around."

"No, all the more reason to cut her out of your life."

"That's your solution, not mine." Kat slapped the kitchen counter for emphasis.

"It's the best solution."

"And where does it leave me if something happens to you?"

"What?" That was a turn in the conversation I wasn't expecting.

"You and Mom are the only family I have left. I was willing to go along with your way of doing things, but after this fall, I'm not willing anymore. When you were kidnapped, I thought you were dead, Galine. Then you got so sick, and I thought you might be dying again."

I grimaced and bit my lower lip. Damn, that was a punch to the gut. The protective cloud of fury that had descended upon me as soon as I had heard Senovia's voice lifted. Katja was home, she was safe, and she was looking at me with genuine fear in her eyes. I found it difficult to stay angry with her when she was so worried about me.

"Kat, I'm fine. You don't need to worry about me. I'm going to be around for a long time." She had no idea how long.

"You don't know that. I looked it up. You don't ever get rid of TB. It could come back. Plus, you never know when something bad is going to happen. Dad was in his thirties."

"Kat, I can't promise I'm never going to get sick again, or never get hurt, but I'm not going to die on you. You shouldn't go running to Senovia because you're afraid you're going to be alone."

"It's not just that. I..." She couldn't form the words.

"What?"

"I've been talking with Mom for a while." Katja refused to meet my gaze.

"What do you mean?" I felt a pit in the bottom of my stomach.

"I hadn't talked to her for a long time, I swear. But then you got taken, and she came over, and she was so kind to me. I saw her once after that, but I ignored her for weeks. Then you were in the hospital, and I got worried again. We started meeting regularly. Once you got out, you were working all the time anyway and so distant, so you didn't even notice."

She was right. I hadn't noticed. I didn't even have an inkling that this had been going on. I had been so wrapped up in my own mess, I hadn't seen it.

"I'm old enough to make my own decisions about this." She stood up straight.

"No, Katja." I clenched and unclenched my fists in frustration. I could feel the anger flaring again, and the panic to keep her safe. "As long as I'm your guardian, you follow my rules. No contact with Senovia, period. And you're grounded for two weeks."

"This isn't over," she promised.

"Do you want me to make it a month after all?"

Katja clamped her mouth shut, but gave me a look that could peel paint off of walls.

The next morning before I left for work, I knocked on Alex's door. I felt I should apologize for the fiasco. He answered in his boxer briefs and he reeked of alcohol. He squinted at me. "You need something?"

I addressed the floor since it was the safest place to look. "I can wait if you want to get dressed."

"Nah. I'm good."

Irritated, I looked back up at him and gave him a nasty look. "Did you take a bath in tequila last night?"

"I'm not really a tequila man. I like scotch."

"Of course you do. It's more pretentious."

He nodded, then seemed to realize he'd been insulted, so he shrugged.

"Alex? Who is it?" A female voice came from within the apartment. He turned around, bumping the door open wider in the process. I could see a blonde in nothing but her underwear standing in the doorway of his bedroom.

"I'll be back in a minute, babe." He blew the blonde a kiss and she giggled.

"It's okay, Mandi, he'll be right back," the blonde said to someone else in the bedroom as she retreated. He had two of them in there!

Alex turned back to face me. "You know, your clubs suck. That place with the mechanical bull is super tacky."

What, was it was my fault that Durham's nightlife didn't live up to his standards? My mouth dropped open, and for a moment I could not make words.

"You... you have the nerve to lecture me about class? I did not bring home two undergrads last night!" A horrible thought occurred to me. "Please tell me there aren't three in there."

He screwed up his face in concentration.

"Oh, did someone lose their thinking cap?" I said it loud so he'd wince.

"No, I remember now. There was a third party interested, but in the end I decided to keep it simple."

"You're disgusting."

"Thank you." He smiled at me.

I slammed the door in his face. To think, I had come over to apologize for my behavior.

Katja and I had dueling foul moods all week. If there was any possibility she could communicate with Senovia, I was all over it. I made her come home straight after school, confiscated her cell phone, and limited her Internet. Her one contact with the outside world was when Alex came over for dinner in the evening. Even then, she spent half the time in stony silence.

I was peeved because every morning on the way to work, I met a new girl in the stairwell on her walk of shame from Alex's apartment. By the fourth one I was so exasperated that I felt I had to give her a chat about self-respect, on behalf of my gender. I tried to give the girl of the day a talking to.

"You are aware he brings home a different girl every night, right? He's not going to call you." I suppose I could have put it in a nicer way, but she should have known better.

She turned to me, "Oh, yeah, I figured."

"Then why?" I spread my arms in a pleading gesture. Someone had to make some sense of Alex for me.

The girl gave me a look a pity. "Oh, you haven't—" She stopped short and looked at

me with a frown. "I assumed you two had..." She paused again and took my hand, then gave me the same serious look teachers give you when they want you to pay attention. "Girl, one night is *worth* it," she said with emphasis. She gave me one more little pat on the hand before strolling the rest of the way down the stairs. I stood there with my mouth open until I heard snickering.

"Sure you just want to be friends?" Alex was on the landing, once again in nothing but a pair of screaming red boxer briefs.

"Quite sure," I said. "Put some clothes on, you exhibitionist. Kat could see you."

I considered putting an end to our dinners together, but Alex's lecherous nighttime activities never seemed to affect how he behaved at our apartment. True to his word, he hadn't made any more moves on me, and he hadn't so much as looked cross-eyed at Kat. If I could keep him away from Harper, who had a track record of falling for bad boys, we'd be fine.

Later, over dinner, I tried my best to not think about Alex's exploits as we discussed Thanksgiving arrangements. "You are going to be civil when we go to the Harper-Carlisles' for Thanksgiving tomorrow, right?" I questioned Katja as she pushed her dinner around her plate.

"Yes. I don't have a problem with them."

"Wait, we're not having Thanksgiving together here?" Alex said, concerned. "What are all the pies for then?" He pointed to the four pies I had cooling on the counter.

"I'm bringing dessert. We can't show up empty-handed."

"So we're having Thanksgiving at Harper's house?"

"No, we're going to the Harper-Carlisle family Thanksgiving. They invited us last year, too. The dinner's at her parent's house. It's confusing, because of Harper's name. Her first name is her mother's maiden name. Her mom comes from an old, prestigious Southern family, so they wanted to preserve the name. Harper's not the only one in attendance; both sides of her family are going to be there."

"Oh. I thought it was an unusual name, especially for a girl," he admitted. "So, what time do we leave then?"

"Alex, you weren't invited." Not to mention I didn't want him anywhere near my best friend who had a history of picking terrible boyfriends.

"Oh, I'm sure no one will mind."

For once, Katja backed me up on this one. "I don't know, Alex. Harper's folks are by the book. They might get mad if you crash their party. Maybe we can bring you home a doggie bag or something."

Alex let it drop. I felt bad for him, spending Thanksgiving alone, so I stayed up late baking a pumpkin pie for him. I took it over the next morning right before Harper was supposed to come pick us up.

Alex answered the door in a suit. I handed him the pie, puzzled. "Here, I made you this. Going somewhere?"

He put the pie down on his kitchen counter, taking a deep sniff in the process. Then he picked up a bottle of wine and his car keys. "Yeah, I'm going with you to Thanksgiving. We better leave or we're going to be late."

"Alex, we've been over this." I sighed.

"Relax, I called Harper, and everything's cool. She said they'd be delighted to have me join you guys."

"How did you even get her number?" Alex raised one eyebrow and a wicked grin spread across his face. "Forget it! I don't want to know."

We went across the hall to collect Katja and the pies, and then we all squeezed into Alex's sports car. I had already checked for stray underwear this time before sitting down, but I still felt like I should give Katja some disinfectant to wipe down the back seat before letting her get in. I shuddered thinking about the things that had taken place back there.

"Have you ever thought about owning a nice four-door?" I asked while trying to

balance two pies and not get anything on my dress.

"Nope."

A couple of hours later, we reached the sprawling estate Harper's parents called home. Alex let out a low whistle as he took in the stately columns of the house's façade and all the BMWs and Mercedes parked in front. "Nice," he said. "My people. This will be easy."

Of course he was right. He schmoozed his way through Harper's family, endearing himself to a couple of uncles with some yachting comments and a stock tip. Next he enraptured an aunt and two female cousins by complimenting each of their outfits and flashing that toothpaste commercial smile of his. The man knew how to work a room. He even had Harper's sourpuss grandma winking at him before we sat down to eat. This was my second Thanksgiving with the Harper-Carlisles, and we had spent other holidays with them, too, but most of them still couldn't remember my name.

I tried to ignore Alex while I chewed on my turkey and stuffing. Katja was being personable, so I didn't have to worry about her. I ate my dinner and several desserts and then wandered around the giant house. Most of the men were watching football, and the women were in various corners chatting, but I didn't feel much like talking. I would have talked to Harper, but I couldn't locate her. I went from room to room, admiring the lavish furnishings. Every so often I would sit on a comfy chair or pick up an interesting knick knack.

Then I opened up the door to the next room, and got an eyeful. Alex and Harper were on a delicate-looking Victorian settee making out. The way they were going at it, I feared for the structural integrity of the antique. Alex's jacket and tie were on the floor, and a few of the buttons of his shirt were undone. Thankfully, that was the only clothing that had been shed.

"You son of a bitch." I am not much given to swearing. My father hated it, and every time I do it, I can imagine the disappointed look on his face. Alex had driven me to my

breaking point, though. I came toward him with the purpose of making him bleed for the third time.

Finally registering my presence, Harper pulled her lips away from Alex and stood up. "Galine! I... ah... I was..."

Alex took her hand and drew her back down to the settee. "You don't have to explain, Harper. I think Galine gets the picture."

"Yeah, I get it. Harper has tragically bad taste in men."

"Apologize," he demanded, with a look of fury that reminded me of Sasha.

"I'm not going to apologize to you," I said. "Not even two weeks ago you were trying to put the moves on me. Forgive me if I don't think your intentions toward Harper are sincere." I decided not to mention the string of women in his apartment for Harper's sake.

"Not to me. Apologize to Harper."

Surprised, I looked first at him and then at Harper. She was beaming at Alex. This made me even more convinced of my previous statement. "No. I love you, Harper, but you do have terrible taste in men."

"I don't know. Sounds like jealousy to me." Harper gave me a hostile look, and put her arms around Alex again. Her body language was sending a clear message: *Mine*.

I took a step back, reeling from shock. What had gotten into her? What was it about this guy that had everyone eating from the palm of his hand?

"What did you do to her?" I demanded, staring him down.

"Nothing," he said, meeting my eyes. That wicked grin was back, though.

Alex had been annoying, infuriating, and just plain rude at times, but he had never scared me before. He had done something to Harper, though; I was sure of it. Had he drugged her? "I don't want you around me and Katja anymore."

"Fine." After all that pleading and fighting to stay in our lives, and with one word he relinquished all of it.

"I want you to stay away from Harper, too." I demanded. She was still clinging to him with a half dazed look.

"That I'm afraid I can't do. I'm rather taken with her."

"You leave her alone or else," I threatened.

"Or else what?" He laughed. "What could you do to me?"

"I've made you bleed before."

"I was playing nice. But I'm not feeling as friendly anymore. Crossing me is not a good idea, Galine." His voice was downright sinister.

"You're scaring me, Alex."

"Good. It's about time you started respecting me."

"Who are you?" I whispered, backing away from him.

"You're the prophet, you tell me."